

Oswald and the KGB

Soviet Security Vetoed His Return in '63

By Daniel Schorr

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On Feb. 4, 1964, ten weeks after President Kennedy's assassination, Lt. Col. Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko of the KGB (Soviet state security) defeated to the United States in Geneva. He said, among other things, that he had handled the file on Lee Harvey Oswald since the ex-marine's arrival in Moscow in 1959.

Brought to the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency, Nosenko was turned over to the FBI on Feb. 26, 1964, for several days of interrogation about Oswald, who the Warren Commission said acted alone in assassinating Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. The interrogation report—part of the Warren Commission's secret file, but never cited in testimony or in conclusions—has been declassified. This account is taken from Nosenko's interrogation.

Nosenko painted a picture of Soviet security officers so leery of Oswald, who they considered mentally unstable and possibly a "sleeper" American agent, that they tried to get him out of the country and vetoed his return when he applied in Mexico City in September, 1963.

The security officer said that an inspection of the Soviets' file after the Dallas murder started a Kremlin flap that reached as high as Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev when a notation was found indicating that a KGB officer in Minsk, in violation of instructions, might have tried to recruit Oswald before his return to the United States.

According to Nosenko, it was with relief that it was finally concluded that the entry was a self-serving lie by a bureaucrat, who was ignorant of the implications.

Nosenko's offer to testify in secret before the Warren Commission was declined. John McCone, then director of the CIA, told this reporter that his counterintelligence officers suspected Nosenko might be a plant to exonerate the Soviets of conspiracy.

When McCone appeared before the Warren Commission with his deputy, Richard Helms, in June, 1964,



LEE HARVEY OSWALD
... considered unstable

they said that there was "no evidence" of a Soviet conspiracy in Kennedy's assassination. But they did not say they might have evidence to the contrary.

Rep. Gerald R. Ford, a member of the Warren Commission, asked, "Is the Central Intelligence Agency continuing any investigation into this area?"

McCone replied, "No, because at the present time we have no information in our files that we have not exhaustively investigated and disposed of to our satisfaction."

Today, McCone says that Nosenko's bona fides "subsequently were proven" and that "it is today the position of the CIA that the information given by Nosenko was correct." Within the agency, it is understood, that is still a subject of dispute.

Whether the Nosenko report would have affected the conclusions of the Warren Commission is hard to judge. Some former staff members said the conclusions that there was "no evidence" of a conspiracy might have been more strongly worded.

Not only did Nosenko deny any Soviet conspiracy, but he said he knew of "no Cuban involvement in the assassination."

The account contained in three interrogations of Nosenko by the FBI can be summarized as follows:

As deputy chief of a KGB counterintelligence section dealing with American and British tourists, Nosenko received a report from an Intourist guide, after Oswald's arrival in Moscow, saying Oswald wanted to stay permanently and become a Soviet citizen.

Deciding that Oswald was "of no interest to the KGB" and "somewhat abnormal,"

Nosenko had the Intourist guide advise Oswald that he would have to leave when his tourist visa expired.

After slashing his wrist in a Moscow hotel, Oswald was taken to a hospital, where an evaluation of "mental instability" was made. Despite Oswald's threat to try suicide again if he had to leave the country, the KGB advised his expulsion, but later learned that some other authority—the foreign ministry or the Red Cross—permitted him to stay in the Soviet Union and sent him to Minsk.

The KGB's file on Oswald was transferred to Minsk with a cover letter containing instructions that the KGB there "take no action concerning Oswald except to 'passively' observe his activities to make sure he was not a United States intelligence agent temporarily dormant."

The next time Nosenko heard of Oswald was in September, 1963, when Oswald applied for a re-entry visa at the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. An exchange of memos between the Foreign intelligence and domestic intelligence directorates of the KGB resulted in a decision that Oswald "not be granted permission to return to the Soviet Union."

Two hours after Kennedy's assassination, Nosenko was called into a KGB office

and asked about Oswald. He telephoned Minsk for a summary of Oswald's file. The summary contained a notation that the KGB in Minsk had tried to "influence Oswald in the right direction."

That stirred further investigation, and the entire file was flown to Moscow by military plane. Vladimir Demichastny, chairman of the KGB, was obliged to report to the party central committee and to Khrushchev.

The investigation concluded that the KGB "had no personal contact with Oswald and had not attempted to utilize him in any manner." The entry about trying to "influence Oswald" was attributed to the KGB in Minsk, "unaware of the international significance of Oswald's activities . . . reporting their endeavors to influence Oswald as a self-serving effort to impress the KGB center."

Nosenko said "the Oswald affair was a source of great concern for KGB headquarters, where a large staff was assembled and records were reviewed "to make certain that the KGB had not utilized Oswald as an agent."

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